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ABSTRACT

This study investigates decision-making among women with unplanned and unwanted conceptions. Subjects were females younger than 18 years old, who were unmarried at the time that they became pregnant (N=432). Data were obtained by means of questionnaires given to subjects prior to abortion or delivery. Questions concerned involvements of mother, father, parents combined, peers, girl friend and male partner in the pregnancy and its resolution. Items also addressed the amount of decision-making conflict, as well as the women's attitudes and perceptions. Findings indicate the following: (1) when respondents first thought they might be pregnant but were not sure, few sought parental advice, especially in comparison to proportions who turned to their male partner or to a friend; (2) once pregnancy was confirmed, the mother had some influence on half or more respondents in each category. This influence was most important for the white adoption and the black abortion groups; and (3) for all groups, mother's influence was positively associated with conflict, suggesting that those who experienced conflict tended to turn to mothers for support or that mothers' intervention increased or produced conflict. Thus, adolescents still choose parents as a source of support. (Author/JLL)

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TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: CHANGING TRENDS

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TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: CHANGING TRENDS?

Prior to the Supreme Court decision on abortion (or other abortion law liberalization) the single adolescent who became pregnant--if she lived with parents or parent--had almost no choice but to involve her parents in her pregnancy. She may have dreaded their reaction and wished to keep her condition secret (Bowerman et al, 1963), but it was almost impossible to do so. She could run away from home, but, aside from that route, there was no other way to prevent her condition from becoming obvious in time. Illegal abortion was closed to most adolescents in terms of both cost and knowledge. Therapeutic abortion was not possible without parental consent. Consequently, most pregnant teenagers accepted the fact, however reluctantly, that they would have to bear the child, regardless of whether they planned to keep it or not. The only alternative to keeping the child was releasing it for adoption, or giving it informally to someone else to raise. Parental involvement in those days might be positively or negatively sanctioning, supportive or controlling, but it was inevitable.

Today the typical pregnant minor has a crucial new option. It is frequently possible for her somehow to raise the $150 or so needed for a legal clinic abortion, take a girlfriend or her boyfriend along, go out on a Saturday or skip school on a weekday, have the abortion, and be home in time for supper as though nothing had happened. The existence of this option means that, when parents are involved in their daughters' pregnancies, it is more likely to be because their daughters choose to include them.

What are the consequences of this changed situation? Does

the new opportunity for secrecy which adolescents have mean that parents now are ignored, excluded, considered irrelevant in the decision-making with respect to the pregnancy? Are teenage decisions (at least to have an abortion) made autonomously, without reference to parents? Or do adolescents turn to their parents by choice, as a resource in a crisis situation?

We know that communication between parents and adolescents concerning sex tends to be quite limited, to have not kept up with other changes with respect to sex (Furstenberg, 1971; Hunt, 1974; Reiss et al, 1975; Sorenson, 1973), and this may be particularly so for pregnant teenagers (Reiss, 1973). There also is some evidence that conflict with parents and lack of parental support and guidance are positively related to sexual experience of adolescents (Chilman, 1976; Miller & Simon, 1974; Schofield, 1965). One might expect, on the basis of such data, that pregnant adolescents would use their new option to shut out their parents from much part in their pregnancy resolution. This paper will examine the extent to which that was found to be the case among the teenagers in a recent study.

Procedures:

The data to be presented came from a study of decision-making among women with unplanned and unwanted conceptions which was conducted throughout Michigan in 1974-75. The part of the sample to be reported on here consists of females younger than 18 years old, who were unmarried at the time they became pregnant (N=432). Of this group, 250 were white and 182 were black. The youngest was 12 years old. The total sample for the overall study consisted of 1746 women; 561 who bore their child and 1185 who chose abortion to resolve their pregnancies.

To select the overall sample, a two-stage stratified sampling design was used. The first stage consisted of sampling organizations which served women with unwanted conceptions, stratified on the basis of caseload size, type of service provided, and geographic location. The organizations included 13 free standing abortion clinics, 12 hospitals which provided abortion procedures, and 35 organizations which offered services to pregnant women who were carrying their pregnancy to term; e.g., religious and secular social agencies, maternity homes, continuing education programs, and prenatal clinics. In the second stage, women served by the selected organizations were sampled on a time basis; i.e., all clients of a sampled organization who were served during a specified time period were included. Cooperation was obtained from 84% of the organizations sampled, and from 93% of the women contacted.

Data were obtained by means of an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire individually given to subjects prior to abortion or delivery. The questionnaire included a number of items dealing with the involvement of mother, father, parents combined, peers, girl friend, and male partner in the pregnancy and its resolution. In addition to individual items, the nature of which will become clear in the presentation of findings, several scales were relevant. One was directed toward ascertaining how much conflict the women had in making their decision, another dealt with their perception of their own competence, a third with attitudes toward the traditional female role, and a fourth with attitudes toward a more modern or feminist female role. Responses on all four scales ranged from 1 to 4, and, as recoded, 4 represented the greatest conflict, the greatest perceived competence, the most traditionality, the highest feminism, while 1 represented the least of each. Percentages

presented in the findings have been adjusted for missing data, so that total numbers will vary from one item to another. Significant differences between continuous variables were determined by Student's t.For nominal variables, Chi Square was used. Relationships are determined by Pearsonian zero order correlations.

Because subcultural patterns of parent-child relations and norms concerning sexual activity seem to differ between blacks and whites, data were analysed separately for these two groups. Another critical differentiating variable for this sample is the decision made with regard to pregnancy resolution. Consequently, data also were analysed separately in terms of that decision. In other words, I ended up with five analysis categories: whites who decided to keep their child (which can be subdivided into those who married and those who remained single); whites who got an abortion; whites who released their child for adoption; blacks who kept their child; and blacks who decided on abortion. There were so few blacks, N=2, who planned to give their child for adoption that they could not be analysed as a separate group. The numbers in each category were: white single keep child=86; white marry keep child=16; white release for adoption=43; white abortion=105; black single keep child=135; black marry keep child=1; black abortion=46.

Findings:

When respondents first thought they might be pregnant but were not sure, few indicated that they sought advice from either of their parents, especially when compared to the proportions who said they turned to their male partner or to a friend (see Table 1).

When seeking a place to confirm their pregnancy, more, but still a small minority, sought parental help. It is clear that most teenagers ascertained whether or not they were pregnant without any assistance from their parents. The average length of time it took them to confirm their pregnancies was between six and nine weeks, so they were able to do this before their pregnancies had become obvious to others.

Once they were sure they were pregnant and began to face what to do about the situation, roughly half of them did it on their own. They were not limited, however, to those who chose abortion; this independence was about equally true of those who planned to keep their child and those who planned abortion, and it even included a sizable minority (21%) of those who decided to release their child for adoption. It is interesting and significant that, considering the option to include or exclude their parents which teenagers now have, the mother had some degree of influence on half or more of respondents in each of the five categories: white keep, adopt, abort and black keep and abort groups. Her influence was greatest with those who planned to release their child for adoption and least with white adolescents who planned to keep their child, but it was considerable for all groups. When compared to that of others, the influence of the mother was significantly more important than that of the girl friend for all groups except those white adolescents who planned to keep their child. For that group, neither mother nor girl friend had a very important influence; those girls tended to be influenced primarily by their male partner. In fact, that was the only group for which the male partner's

influence was significantly more important than the mother's (see Table2). Mother's influence was both relatively (compared to male) and absolutely most important for white girls who released their child for adoption and for black girls who chose abortion.

In order to better understand the meaning of mother's influence, the relationship of her influence to several other variables was investigated. Her influence was positively and significantly associated with the influence of the father, although it was greater, suggesting that when one parent was consulted or utilized this tended to be true of both. Her influence was not consistently associated with the influence of others, however. For white abortion and black keep groups, it was related to that of girl friend, although it was significantly greater, but this did not hold for the other three groups.

For all five groups, the mother's influence was both positively and significantly associated with conflict (see Table 3), suggesting that those who experienced conflict tended to turn to mothers for support or that mothers' intervention increased or produced conflict. Independence of decision-making, on the other hand, was both negatively and significantly associated with conflict, with the exception of the black abortion group, where the negative relationship was not a significant one. The mother's influence was negatively associated with the adolescents' perceived competence among the white teenage groups, but not among the black ones. Independence of decision-making, on the other hand, was positively associated with perceptions of competence for respondents in all five groups. The association was significant. For none of the groups was the mother's influence significantly associated with

either traditional or feminist attitudes toward the female role. In other words, traditionally oriented adolescents were no more or less likely to seek support from their mothers than were feminist teenagers.

Discussion:

The fact that few adolescents involved their parents during the stage when they thought they might be pregnant but were not sure suggests that parents did not know about their daughters' sexual activity--at least explicitly. This would be in accord with most research findings from earlier studies. As was mentioned earlier, communication between teenagers and their parents about sexual activity has tended to be minimal, and this situation seems to be due as much to parental desires as to adolescent reluctance. For instance, Bell (1966) and Briedis (1975) argue that such evasion between parents and their daughters springs from a mutual desire to avoid disruption of family relationships and conflict over different standards of sexual conduct. Furstenberg (1971) states that lower class mothers are reluctant to discuss sex with daughters both because they fear that open discussion may stimulate sexual interest and because they lack knowledge about sex and a vocabulary for discussing sexual functions. If parents of respondents in this study had known that their daughters were sexually active, it would have been natural for their children to turn to them to discuss the possibility that they were pregnant.

It is not surprising that, once they knew they were pregnant, many respondents (about half) took advantage of their new option and did not involve their parents in their pregnancy resolution decision-making. If their anticipations of parental condemnation,

criticism, hurt or embarrassment were comparable to those of adolescents when secrecy was not an alternative (Bowerman et al., 1963-1966; Briedis, 1975; Furstenberg, 1971; Rains, 1971), avoidance of parental involvement would make sense. Those who chose abortion could not only avoid parental involvement, but also parental knowledge of their condition and possible consequent disapproval.

Those who kept the child could not prevent parental knowledge, of course, but the girls who were not influenced by parents perhaps saw themselves as more independent of parents than had comparable daughters in the past. The most important influence among white adolescents who kept their child was their male partner. He was significantly more important than the mother. The group of whom this was true did not tend to be those who married as a solution to their pregnancy, however. Most of that group were influenced by their mother as well as by their prospective husbands. The group who were not influenced by the mother consisted mainly of those who planned to remain single. The inference to be drawn from the greater influence of male partner than mother may be that, young as they were, many of the white teenagers who kept their child were not relying on parents for financial support or for care of the child. Fewer of this category lived with their mother than was so for any other category (59%) and more of them lived with their male partner(12%). They may have been more often emancipated minors. The majority of those who kept the child did not wish to marry as a solution, Their decision to keep the child seemed to be a positive choice, different from the earlier period when adoption was the major viable alternative to keeping the child. In other words,

the fact that they could have chosen abortion may have given them both pride in the alternate decision and leverage in bargaining with parents. They did not need to feel guilty and ashamed to be a single parent; they did not have to be one. They made such comments as,"Im very capable and willing to take on this responsibility that will last my lifetime," and "I want to prove to myself and others that I can handle the situation."

On the other hand, the other group of teenagers--those who did turn to their parents, or to their mother, as a resource--also was a large proportion. Their behavior runs contrary to the literature which associates lack of intimacy with or trust in parents to their sexual experience. How can we explain this? It seems possible that sexual experience among adolescents today is less frequently a reaction against parents than it may have been in the past, because it is less societally deviant than formerly. In addition, parents may be less negative toward sexual experience for their daughters now that the possible consequences are less inevitably disasterous. As Reiss (1976) points out, responsibility for others, such as parents have for children, is negatively associated with sexual permissiveness, because those who feel responsible wish to guard their charges from harm. When childbearing was the inevitable result of pregnancy, parents well may have dreaded the very real costs for their daughters. Such costs are well documented. Infant mortality rates are high among this age group, child development is hampered, the teenage mother's economic well-being and life options are narrowed, and her psychological well-being is threatened (Arnold & Hoffman, 1974; Brunswick, 1971; DeLissovoy, 1973; Furstenberg, 1976; Gabrielson et al., 1970; Johnson, 1974; Oppel & Royston,

1971; Presser, 1971; Sarrel & Davis, 1966; Trussell, 1976). With abortion as a means of avoiding the costs of early childbearing, parental attitudes toward unintended pregnancy may be milder than previously.

Of course, use of parents as a resource may not have been associated with intimacy for this group either; my data do not allow me to determine this. An alternative explanation for use of parents as a resource may be the intensity of need on the part of those girls who did turn to their mother. We have seen that there was a positive relationship between mother's influence and degree of conflict, and, for the white group, a negative relationship between mother's influence and degree of perceived competence. Given the possibility of preventing parental knowledge of the pregnancy, it seems likely that conflict and lack of perceived competence led to utilization of the mother as a resource rather than the reverse. The less conflict a girl had and the more competent she felt, the more independent and autonomous she could be and was.

I also found that those who chose the most traditional, conservative, socially acceptable solution--adoption--sought their mother's assistance more than any other group. This is not unexpected, but it perhaps is surprising that this group did not differ from the other white groups in terms of attitudes toward traditional and modern female role.

The other group with whom the mother had relatively great influence was the black abortion group. Abortion is the more deviant solution among blacks. Keeping the child is a fairly acceptable and traditional solution to a single pregnancy, but

many blacks, and especially black males, tend to view abortion as genocide and to be strongly opposed to it. Blacks who chose abortion indicated little support from either friends or male partner. They may have needed support from someone before taking this somewhat negatively sanctioned step, and their mothers might be most likely to empathize with the plight of a female with an unwanted pregnancy. In addition, they may have needed practical assistance, and,if their male partner refused it, they might have to turn to parents for money, etc.

In summary, the consequences of the new option of secrecy for teenagers do not seem to be rejection of parents as a source of support. The mother's influence was still more significant than that of girl friends and comparable to that of the male partner except for one group. Perhaps the generation gap may not be as great as is sometimes supposed since parents, as well as peers, are chosen as a source of support by many adolescents who have a real choice as to whether they wish to do so or not.

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Table 1. Percentage of Each Category Who Answered "Yes" When Asked Whether or Not They Sought Advice from a Given Source--Mother, Father, Male Partner or Girlfriend--at the Time They First Thought They Might be Pregnant But Were not Sure.

Category	Mother		Father		Male Partner		Girlfriend	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Overall (N=432)	12	53	2	10	33	144	33	142
White keep (N=101)	9	9	3	3	47	48	30	31
White adopt (N=43)	7	3	3	3	30	13	51	22
White abort (N=105)	12	13	3	1	41	43	42	44
Black keep (N=136)	15	20	2	3	21	29	27	36
Black abort (N=46)	17	8	0	0	24	11	20	9

Table 2. Percentage Responses of Each Category When Asked About Influence on Decision by Mother, Father, Male Partner, and Girlfriend.

Category	Mother			Father			Male Partner			Girlfriend		
	None	Some	A lot	None	Some	A lot	None	Some	A lot	None	Some	A lot
Overall (N=432)	43	26	30	70	16	14	42	17	40	65	21	14
White keep (N=101)	50	35	15	73	18	9	30	14	56	65	23	12
White adopt (N=43)	21	29	50	38	31	31	55	14	31	69	24	7
White abort (N=105)	46	23	31	66	18	16	43	22	35	58	28	14
Black keep (N=136)	45	20	35	76	11	13	40	15	45	66	13	2
Black abort (N=46)	39	29	32	85	7	7	66	24	10	78	17	5

Table 3. Pearsonian Zero Order Correlations of Mother's Influence with Other Variables, and Independence of Decision-Making with Conflict and Competence, for all Five Categories.

Category	Decmom-Decdad	Decmom-Decgirl	Decmom-Decman	Decmom-Whodecid	Decmom-Conflict	Decmom-Competence	Whodecid Conflict	Whodecid Competence
White keep	.35***	-.01	.19*	-.40***	.30**	-.20*	-.22*	.23*
White adopt	.67***	-.19	.33*	-.32*	.34**	-.52***	-.51***	.35*
White abort	.48***	.30**	-.03	-.27**	.24**	-.21*	-.45***	.23*
Black keep	.32***	.34***	.13	-.15*	.16*	.02	-.26**	.22**
Black abort	.29*	.04	-.07	-.40**	.29*	.06	-.27	.32*

Decmom=Influence of mother, Decdad=influence of father; Decgirl=Influence of girlfriend; Decman=Influence of male partner; Whodecid=Independence of decision on pregnancy resolution; Conflict=degree of conflict over decision; Competence=self perceived competence of subject.

*** = significance at the .001 level.
** = significance at the .01 level.
* = significance at the .05 level.